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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relation between mothers' epistemological perspectives and their use of communication strategies with their children. A total of 47 mothers raising young children in rural and social isolation and economic poverty participated. The Ways of Knowing interview was used to assess mothers' epistemological assumptions. Mother-child interactions in a free play session and in two teaching tasks were videotaped and coded to determine mothers' communication strategies. A series of two-way multivariate analyses of variance on communication strategies was conducted. As expected, communication strategies were used differentially across task. In addition, women with the least developed ways of knowing used the most power-oriented strategies with their children. In the least structured teaching task, women at more complex epistemological positions were more likely to use strategies that placed significant cognitive demands on the children. Implications of the findings for promoting mothers' intellectual development, and thereby supporting productive parenting skills and the healthy development of children in an impoverished, rural environment, are considered. Appended are three tables of related material and four references. (Author/GLR)

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The Relationship Between Mothers' Epistemological Perspectives and Their Communication Strategies With Their Young Children

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Abstract

The limited effectiveness of parent training programs has led investigators to examine the ways in which parents' underlying beliefs about child development play a role in mediating parenting strategies (e.g., McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1982; Sigel, 1981). Meanwhile, parents' beliefs about how children learn and grow are likely to be related to the parents' own level of cognitive and epistemological development. This study examines the relation between mothers' epistemological perspectives and their use of particular communication strategies with their children. Forty-seven mothers raising young children in rural and social isolation and economic poverty participated. The Ways of Knowing interview (adapted from Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986) was used to assess mothers' epistemological assumptions. Mother-child interactions in a Freeplay session and in two teaching tasks were videotaped and coded to assess mothers' communication strategies (using a scheme adapted from Flaugher & Sigel, 1980). A series of two-way multivariate analyses of variance (Epistemological Group by Task) on communication strategies was conducted. As expected, communication strategies were used differentially across Task. In addition, women with the least developed ways of knowing used the most power-oriented strategies with their children. In the least structured teaching task, women at more complex epistemological positions were more likely to use strategies that placed significant cognitive demands upon the children. Implications of these findings for promoting mothers' own intellectual development in an effort to support more productive parenting skills and the healthy development of children in an impoverished, rural environment are considered.

AIMS

1. To examine the experiences of mothers raising young children in economic poverty and social and rural isolation.
2. To examine the relationship between mothers' epistemological perspectives and their use of particular communication strategies with their children.

METHOD

Participants

Forty-seven mothers with young children were recruited from a rural, socially isolated region based upon the following eligibility criteria: (a) 21 - 34 years of age, (b) at least one child 3.5 - 6.5 years of age, (c) living below poverty level, (d) living in social/rural isolation, (e) family identified by one or more referring agencies as having little family support and/or as being at risk for abuse or neglect of children and/or unusual stress, and (f) lack of involvement in support and self-help groups.

Procedure

Participants' epistemologies were assessed through the Ways of Knowing interview (Belenky, et al., 1986) which was tape-recorded and transcribed. Mothers' communication strategies were observed and coded from a twenty minute videotaped mother-child interaction. All procedures were conducted in the families' homes.

Measures

The Ways of Knowing Interview is an open-ended interview that focuses on the interviewees' thoughts about the nature of knowledge and truth and about themselves as knowers. The scheme of intellectual development upon which the interview is based depicts

five distinct epistemological perspectives that may well comprise a developmental course. (See Table 1 for a more complete description.)

The Videotaped Mother-Child Interaction consisted of 10 minutes of Freeplay (five minutes of which was coded), and two five minute teaching tasks. During Freeplay the mother was asked to play with the child as she normally would. For the teaching tasks, the mother was asked to help her child: (a) learn how to build a structure with Legos (small interlocking blocks), and (b) learn how to assemble a particular (age-appropriate) puzzle. Mothers' behaviors were coded for various communication strategies. (See Table 2 for a more complete description.)

RESULTS

1. The women's epistemologies represented the first three positions described in the Ways of Knowing Scheme (see Table 1). Of the 47 women, 10 held some Silent epistemological assumptions, 20 were at the pure Received position, and 14 held both Received and Subjective assumptions. Only three women were at the pure Subjectivist position and none of the women in this sample articulated epistemologies beyond the pure Subjectivist position.
2. The mothers in this sample used mostly directive strategies (Task Management and Low Mental Operational Demands) when communicating with their children in the 15 minutes of interaction that was coded. (See Table 3 for means.)
3. There was a significant main effect for Epistemological Group on Child Management, a power-oriented communication strategy, $F(2,44) = 4.17$, $p = .02$; women in the "Any Silence" epistemological group used more Child Management strategies than the

mothers in the other two groups (see Table 3).

4. There was a marginal interaction between Task and Epistemological Group, $F(4,86) = 2.16$, $p = .08$; women at the more complex epistemological positions used more inductive strategies than other mothers during the Lego task, the least structured of the teaching tasks (see Table 3).

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

There is a relationship between mothers' epistemologies and their use of the Child Management strategies. The relationship between mothers' underlying epistemologies and their use of more inductive communication strategies was best seen in a semi-structured teaching task that had more than one correct avenue for its solution. These results lead us to suggest that a better understanding of the relationship between mothers' epistemologies and their use of communication strategies in varied contexts would be helpful in designing parenting programs. Attempts to promote the healthy development of children might best include an effort to promote mothers' own epistemological development. If mothers do not imagine their own abilities to learn and construct knowledge, it is unlikely that they will imagine promoting these skills in their children.

Table 1. Ways of Knowing

SILENCE: Experiences the self as both "deaf and dumb," without any capacity for receiving knowledge from others. Words are seen more as weapons than as a means for sharing meaning.

RECEIVED KNOWING: Received Knowers learn from listening to others, especially to authorities who know the truth. Truth can be embodied in words. Truth is single, absolute, concrete, and factual so a thing is either right or wrong, true or false, good or evil.

SUBJECTIVE KNOWING: The source of knowledge is located in the self. Listening to one's own inner voice becomes primary as knowledge is now seen as being based on one's own personal experience and intuition. Believes in multiple truths and multiple realities as personal and private that cannot be communicated or generalized.

PROCEDURAL KNOWING: Knowledge is acquired, developed, and communicated through the deliberate and systematic use of procedures. These take two forms:

> Separate Mode: Focus is on evaluating and judging different points of view or arguments. Abstract and analytic. Objectivity achieved by adhering to impersonal standards and keeping the self separate from the process. Feelings cloud thought. The goal is to construct truth--to prove, disprove and convince.
>
> Connected Mode: Focus is on trying to understand and experience another's perspective, another's reality, and to be understood. Narrative and holistic rather than analytic. Objectivity achieved through adopting the other's perspective. Feelings illuminate thought. The goal is to construct meaning--to understand and to be understood.

CONSTRUCTED KNOWING: Knowledge is understood to be constructed and the knower is seen as shaping the known. Separate and connected modes of discourse are integrated. The goal is to understand the contexts out of which ideas arise, and to take responsibility for examining, evaluating, and developing systems of thought. To care about thinking and think about caring.

Adapted from M. F. Belenky, B. M. Clinchy, N. R. Goldberger, & J. M. Tarule (1986). Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind. New York: Basic Books.

Table 2. Videotaped Mother-Child Interaction Coding Categories

CODING CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Child Management	Parental efforts at stopping or modifying a behavior of the child that the parent does not approve of.
Task Management	Specific directions the parent gives the child that are related to facilitating the task.
Mental Operational Demand (MOD)	Level of cognitive demand placed on the child.
Low MOD	Closed questions or parent statements that may or may not require a response from the child; very little information processing is required of the child.
Medium MOD	Parent questions that require the child to retrieve information in order to respond to the parent. These questions necessitate that the child go beyond the information given and manipulate it in some fashion.
High MOD	Parent questions that require the child to not only retrieve information but also to organize and integrate it in order to respond to the parent. The child is generating her own thoughts, ideas, methods.

Adapted from J. Flaugher & I. Sigel (1980). Parent-child interaction observation schedule. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Table 3. Mean Frequency of Communication Strategy Use as a Function of Epistemological Group and Task

Communication Strategy	Epistemological Group	Task: Freeplay	Legos	Puzzle	Across Task
Child Management[a]	Any Silence	4.87	4.22	2.63	3.91
	Pure Received	2.45	1.70	2.24	2.13
	Any Subjective	2.35	1.41	1.64	1.80
	Across Group	2.93	2.13	2.10	2.39
Task Management[b]	Any Silence	9.65	13.35	22.77	15.26
	Pure Received	8.82	15.03	18.00	13.95
	Any Subjective	9.55	16.68	21.84	16.02
	Across Group	9.26	15.27	20.40	14.98
Low MOD[b]	Any Silence	12.40	14.75	16.12	14.42
	Pure Received	11.86	19.24	15.94	15.68
	Any Subjective	16.94	19.86	20.60	19.13
	Across Group	13.81	18.51	17.66	16.66
Medium MOD[c]	Any Silence	9.01	5.95	13.71	9.56
	Pure Received	8.45	10.16	13.71	10.77
	Any Subjective	11.39	10.80	10.56	10.92
	Across Group	9.63	9.50	12.57	10.56
High MOD[d]	Any Silence	.40	.14	.20	.25
	Pure Received	.55	.66	.05	.42
	Any Subjective	.18	.32	.14	.21
	Across Group	.38	.43	.11	.31

[a] There was a significant main effect for Epistemological Group on Child Management, a power-oriented communication strategy, $F(2,44) = 4.17$, $p = .02$; women in the "Any Silence" epistemological group used more Child Management strategies than the mothers in the other two groups.

[b] There was a significant main effect for Task on use of Task Management and Low MODs, $F(2,43) = 18.00$, $p < .001$; $F(2,88) = 3.94$, $p = .02$, respectively; Freeplay differed from both Legos and Puzzle for Task Management while all three groups differed from each other for Low MODs.

[c] There was a marginal interaction between Task and Epistemological Group, $F(4,86) = 2.16$, $p=.08$; women at the more complex epistemological positions used more inductive strategies than other mothers during the Lego task, the least structured of the teaching tasks.

[d] Usage of High MODs was extremely low and inter-rater reliability for this coding category was poor, $r = .10$; thus, analyses on these data could not be conducted.

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